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Validating the Past in the Present

First Nations' Collaborations with Museums

During the 1990s, inspired by sometimes patient, sometimes militant, but always persistent messages from Native American and First Nations individuals, cultural and political organizations, many museums and art galleries began to change the way they portrayed Native American material and sacred culture. Thus, a number of museums today are consulting the rightful owners of privileges to present the histories of their artifacts in the museum context. This can apply both to older ethnographic specimens and, significantly, to newly created pieces. With the agreement and authority of the chiefs or families who are the rightful owners, institutions will commission contemporary artists to create artifacts that are later validated by use in traditional ceremony and then integrated into an exhibit or collection. In addition, these new pieces are often made available for the chiefs or families to borrow for use in future ceremonies. In the process, museum professionals learn how to properly care for regalia and are able to record specific and detailed information relating to the history, use, and significance of artifacts. In the past this information was not always elicited by museum collectors nor was it always forthcoming when objects were acquired.

Wawadiłła ("He orders them to come inside"), the ceremonial house of Chief Nakapenkum, Mungo Martin, built by him in 1954 in Thunderbird Park, Victoria. Photo courtesy the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, British Columbia (PN 22259).

Since the 1950s, there have been isolated museological examples showing respect for traditional ways in the care and exhibition of First Nations artifacts, particularly in British Columbia, Canada. An early example of this consultation and co-operation was the construction in 1954 of the ceremonial house of Chief Nakapenkum (Mungo Martin) in Thunderbird Park, adjacent to the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now the Royal British Columbia Museum) in Victoria. Chief Mungo Martin exercised an inherited prerogative when he built the house on the museum property, modeled on a prototype that stood in Fort Rupert village in the late-19th century. The museum not only recognized Mungo Martin's title to the ceremonial house, but also agreed to use it in accordance with his instructions. His successor currently holds the same authority, and his written permission must be obtained by any tribal group or outside agency that wants to use the house for ceremonial, political, cultural, or educational purposes.

The Royal British Columbia Museum applied a similar protocol in 1977, when the house of Chief Kwakwabalasami (Jonathan Hunt) of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation (formerly Kwakiutl) was constructed and installed in a permanent exhibit within the museum. Because the house, and many of its attendant architectural features, came as a dowry through Hunt's wife's uncle, both Hunt and his wife were involved in a contractual arrangement whereby they allowed their rights inherent in the house to be displayed for the visiting public. The terms also ensured that the prerogatives displayed were not alienated from them and their heirs. As with the Mungo Martin House, use of the Hunt House for school and public programs is always negotiated with the current rights holder on an event-by-event basis.

The privileges that came as a dowry from Mrs. Hunt's childless uncle included the house-frontal painting featuring a Sisiutl and two

Sea Eagle mask and costume. The Sea Eagle dancer "calls out" many sea creatures, one by one, to perform on the floor of the dance house. Made by Kwakwaka'wakw artist Calvin Hunt, shown in the photo. Photo by Dane Simoes. Photo courtesy The Museum at Campbell River (988.34 a-d).

Thunderbirds; the four carved houseposts featuring ancestral Sea Eagles, Seals, Grizzly Bears, Ravens and Killerwhales; and the speaker's figure inside the entrance. Included inside the house are a ceremonial dance screen, two Cannibal Bird masks acquired through the judicious marriage of the chief's eldest son, and a talking stick that was bestowed on the son at the time of his birth by a Heiltsuk (formerly Bella Bella) chief. Singers and orators were hired to record the Hamaťsa (Cannibal Dancer) and Cannibal Bird songs and recount the history of the house. Excerpts from this ethnographic record are included in the exhibit sound track, incorporating some of the speeches of welcome and songs in Kwakwala (the language of the Kwakwaka'wakw people).

The house was dedicated in a ceremony attended by a small number of Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs, museum staff, and volunteers. The installation of the house as an exhibit meant that it also had to be validated within the wider Kwakwaka'wakw community. At a later event in Alert Bay (a major Kwakwaka'wakw village on Cormorant Island, off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island), Hunt and his wife held a potlatch ceremony to complete the affirmation process.

At the time of the agreement, the museum had the advantage of First Nations artists on staff, notably the son and grandsons of Chief Kwakwabalasami. While these artifacts and ritual privileges are exhibited and are directly accessible to the visiting public—they can enter the house, sit in the settee, and touch the masks—they are not alienated from the heirs of the privileges who continue to exercise authority over them today.

Another instance of cultural sensitivity took place during the 1980s, when the staff at the Campbell River Museum on central Vancouver Island developed the storyline for exhibits that were installed in its new premises in 1998. Since the curatorial policy of the museum required the legitimate owners of ceremonial privileges to participate as advisors for the exhibitions and associated programs, several First Nations families were involved in the development of the exhibits. A chiefly Gwawa'enuxw (one of the tribes [independent villages] of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation) family owned a complex dance involving a suite of masks, potentially numbering in excess of 40, and had shown a modest version of it at a potlatch to which museum staff had been invited. The staff and potlatch host family thought that the saga of a young boy who journeys to the Undersea Realm and remains there for four years encountering many real and supernatural sea creatures, would lend itself to a successful public exhibit. The museum entered into negotiations with Elsie Williams, the widow of the Chief who owned the privilege, for its inclusion as a permanent exhibit. An agreement was reached permitting the institution to commission, over a period of time, a new suite of masks, created by contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw carvers, for display in the exhibit. In the beginning, more than two dozen artists recommended by the family were told of the exhibit plans and the Williams family's involvement, and each was asked to make a particular mask. Most of these artists were best known for their work for the art market, but they also had created regalia for use in traditional ceremonies. The artists made their individual pieces knowing they were working for a chiefly family and that the masks would be danced as well as exhibited in a public forum; many of them stated they were inspired to create exceptionally fine and complex works for the family.

Chief Tom Willie, family historian and second husband of Elsie Williams, recorded the saga of the young hero's adventures in the undersea

realm in the Kwakwala language, provided a gloss in English, and recorded the song narrating the story, which is enacted by dancers wearing the masks. Chief Robert Joseph, a close relative, wrote and recorded the exhibit narration in English, enhancing it with Kwakwala phrases, terms, and honorific oratory. The growing suite of masks was exhibited twice at family potlatches between 1988, when it was commissioned, and the installation of the exhibit in 1998, thereby validating the masks as ethnographic specimens.

Recently, the family agreed to leave the masks on permanent display and commissioned another suite of masks for continuing use by the family. The current chief has forbidden photographs of the exhibit installation, although, with permission, the museum can publish record photographs of the individual masks.

These modern-day museum collaborations have a precedent: in 1904, the ethnographer Charles H. Newcombe arranged for several Northwest Coast artists to be resident cultural interpreters at the World's Exposition in St. Louis. Masks, including a Bakwas and an Echo, were made at that time by Kwakwaka'wakw carver Bob Harris, and these and other artifacts were used in public performances in St. Louis and later incorporated into the collection of The Field Museum in Chicago.

Recently, 180 masks from 10 of the 14 First Nations on the Northwest Coast were featured in a major traveling exhibit mounted by the Vancouver Art Gallery that toured North America. *Down From the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast* was created with the authority and involvement of political and cultural designates of the Nations on the Pacific coast. Representatives of the Musqueam Nation of the Coast Salish requested that their sacred Sxwaixwe mask not be shown. However, the opening venue of the exhibit in Vancouver was in Musqueam traditional territory, and it was essential that they formally approve of the exhibit concept and allow the foreign masks to come into their homeland. Ultimately, the Musqueam Band co- hosted the exhibit at the Vancouver venue.

For this exhibit, masks were borrowed from chiefly families and private collectors as well as public institutions in Europe, the United States, and Canada. It was imperative to follow traditional protocols of respect for handling the masks when transporting them between venues: the beaks of Cannibal Bird masks were tied shut, and the masks were wrapped in blankets when in transit. In addition, some masks were unwrapped in the presence of representatives from the originating Nation who sometimes performed private ceremonies in the galleries once the masks were installed. Also, blessing ceremonies took place at appropriate times during the installation and deinstallation of the exhibit; these sanctified the exhibition spaces and the museum people who were working with the masks, and finally, the ceremonies prepared the masks to be moved from one location to another. Label copy used the correct spelling of tribal names and the names of masks as designated by tribal authorities. Permission was sought from the appropriate tribal authorities in Ontario, Oklahoma, Oregon, and California before the exhibit entered the traditional territories of the First Nation on whose land the host museum was located. At each venue, the opening ceremonies were witnessed by local tribal representatives, sometimes involving them, when appropriate. On two occasions, masks were temporarily removed from the exhibition at the request of the artist or the owner, so they could be used in traditional ceremony. To contextualize an installation of a group of Cannibal Bird masks, they were positioned by an

Mask representing Bakwas, the Wild Man of the Woods, carved by Kwakwaka'waw artist Bob Harris in 1904 at the World's Exposition in St. Louis where it was used in a public dance performance. Now in The Field Museum, Chicago. Photo by Charles Carpenter, courtesy The Field Museum (Neg. No. CSA13595).

accomplished Kwakwaka'wakw dancer so they would be seen in aspects similar to an actual dance performance. Because these masks were all of contemporary manufacture, the owners and creators agreed that they could be exhibited unobstructed by glass, thus creating a contextual ambiance not usually found in an art museum installation. They were placed in front of a painted ceremonial curtain that was commissioned by the Vancouver Art Gallery and that featured the family prerogatives of Chief Robert Joseph, a curator of the exhibit.

In the past, masks and regalia were completely hidden away and used only with authority of the chief during a potlatch. Then, in a period beginning in the early-20th century, they were used frequently in public demonstrations and performances. Over the past century the display of Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial artifacts has reached a point where it is now common to see them in public places, including commercial galleries, airports, and museums. Traditional items are often represented in art for sale: for example, masks, rattles, and button blankets. Since artists in Kwakwaka'wakw society are very prominent in their own communities, and many have achieved international renown, they have taken the lead in the respectful display of ceremonial regalia in commercial contexts. Increasingly, the current generation of artists is recognizing a strong spiritual dimension in its artworks and is trying to be sensitive to the way they are displayed and used. In the last decade, debate in the community has re-emerged regarding what should and should not be done with these masks in order to be sensitive to the concerns of dancers and chiefs. These discussions were very much a part of the development process for *Down From the Shimmering Sky*. As the curators of the show, we wanted to share the high regard and reverence that is felt for these masks while exhibiting them for the public. One way we did this was to wrap a Cannibal Bird mask in a blanket, as is traditionally done when they are stored away between uses. It was exhibited alone in a small room to remind museum visitors of the reverence and sanctity that attends the masks when not in use.

For the opening ceremony at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Musgamagw (one of the tribes [independent villages] of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation) chiefs allowed a sacred dance to be performed, which recognized and acknowledged the importance of the exhibit on behalf of a culture that has existed for a very long time. They followed the proper protocol by having an important ceremony to show the public how much respect they had for the exhibit.

By being aware of cultural sensitivities and engaging in consultations, museums can begin to resolve the ethical and legal issues of exhibiting material that is private, personal, and sacred. This process also provides a first-person context for the subject by introducing the First Nations voice, the only authority that can speak about the privileges presented, confirming the fact that these are continuing and current practices. The practice of displaying contemporary objects together with ethnographic pieces of considerable age further reflects the continuum and reinforces the living culture.

The honor of sharing personal traditional information, provided by the First Nations owners to museums, offers unparalleled opportunities for visitors to understand art and artifacts in their rightful and authentic contexts.

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